



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Breaking Open the Word Third Sunday of Advent C



Alexander Andrejewitsch Iwanow, 1837-1857.
Christ comes to where John the Baptist is preaching and baptizing.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Blessing of an Advent Wreath

Before your group lights the first candle of the Advent wreath, the following blessing may be prayed.

All make the sign of the cross.

Leader: The kingdom of God is at hand.

All respond: Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Leader: Let us call to mind God's mercy and salvation as we wait in hope during the days and weeks of Advent. As we gather around this wreath let us remember God's promise to be with us until the end of time.

Scripture is read. Isaiah 9: 1-2a.

All respond: Thanks be to God.

After a time of silence, all join in prayers of intercessions and in the Lord's Prayer.

Leader: Let us ask God to bless our wreath and to bless us.

After a short silence, the leader prays:

Heavenly Father,

We praise and thank you for the great gift of your Son Jesus, the Christ.

You sent him as a Light to the nations.

You sent him to reveal your Light and Love to a world darkened by sin.

Christ is our hope and our salvation.

Upon him we place all our trust.

He is Emmanuel, the promised Messiah.

He brings wisdom and peace to a troubled world.

Lord God,

bless this wreath and

bless those who gaze upon its light in hopeful anticipation.

Come, Lord Jesus, come in haste, come!

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

The third candle is lighted.

Leader: Let us praise God, the ruler of the universe.

All respond, making the sign of the cross:

The God who made heaven and earth!

The blessing concludes with a verse from "O Come O Come, Emmanuel"

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& Creed
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today we hear again from the prophet who will prepare the way for Jesus, John the Baptist.
- ▶ John the Baptist fulfills his role in God's plan of salvation as he paves the way for the One who is to come, the One we are to revere.
- ▶ Every Sunday of Advent is an invitation to enter more deeply into relationship with the Christ who came once in history, who comes each day in our lives and who will come again in glory.
- ▶ Today is referred to as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete means *rejoice!* This originates from the Entrance Antiphon of the liturgy for today which prays: Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice! The Lord is near! (taken from Phil. 4:4, 5).
- ▶ This day reminds us that our ritual remembrance of the incarnation of Christ, the Son of God into the world is just about here.
- ▶ Underneath Advent's theme of repentance is an undercurrent of joyful anticipation—an interior peace. This reserved joy is a plea that all be prepared and that sadness be removed.
- ▶ John once again is the figure of Advent who challenges us to repent and reminds us of our need for God's forgiveness and redemption. We await the kingdom here now and in this place, and the kingdom yet to come. We look forward to the Christ who will one day return and take us all home.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First reading: Zephaniah 3:14-18

- ▶ It behooves us to listen carefully to the prophet Zephaniah since we only hear from him once in the three year cycle.
- ▶ Zephaniah constantly warned the people that God's judgment was near. His was hardly a cheerful or optimistic proclamation of Good News.
- ▶ Zephaniah laid bare Israel's sin of worship of false idols, arrogance, pride, self-sufficiency, and failure to trust God in all things.
- ▶ The prophet warns the people that punishment is coming. Sinners will be expelled. NO longer will they be allowed to poison the community by their sinful behavior.
- ▶ The reference to "day of the Lord" is a reference to the time that forgiveness will be extended to God's people and that sin will be no more.
- ▶ Zephaniah warns the people to prepare themselves for the future day when God's retribution will come upon them.

- ▶ The prophet exudes careful, joyful anticipation of that future day in which the Lord will act and God's people will be delivered from sin, welcomed into the fold and all will be reconciled.
- ▶ As in all the Advent readings, there is an inherent call for total conversion of heart. The sinner is to abandon his or her life completely into the care of God.
- ▶ The liturgy is resplendent with the exhortation to joyfully wait for the day of the Lord.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ How can this reading be a word for you today?
- ▶ A good question to ask ourselves in this Advent season: How converted am I to God?
- ▶ What areas of my life would God affirm and tell us causes for great rejoicing?
- ▶ Where is growth needed? If this is a time of God's judgment, what would God ask us to consider changing in our lives?

Second Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

- ▶ The source of Gaudete Sunday can be found in this letter to the Philippians which has always been read on this Third Sunday of Advent.
- ▶ The reading senses and evokes our anticipatory joy. It echoes what we know—that coming of the Lord, the Prince of Peace is near.
- ▶ The season of Advent is a clarion call for all to repent.
- ▶ Repentance notwithstanding, the undertones throughout the season are that of joyful anticipation. Sorrow is lifted; joy abounds.
- ▶ We are to lift our heads toward the light and cast off the darkness of gloom. The Lord has come, is coming and will come!
- ▶ Paul's letter is in response to a conflict between two women in the community. Paul wants them to consider the foolishness of their divisive behavior. What does their conflict have to do with the grand scheme of life—salvation through the Incarnation of God's Son?
- ▶ When all things are considered in light of the Paschal Mystery there is no need for quarrels or division.
- ▶ We have already been given the ultimate gift and meaning for our lives.
- ▶ Paul was incredulous. How could two people engage in petty arguments when life is so short and eternity is forever?
- ▶ Paul exhorted the community to love another as they awaited the day of the Lord.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ What is the primary message in Paul’s letter to his beloved community? In what way is this Good News for us today?
- ▶ Are there any situations in your life that at one time seemed huge, but in light of the Gospel and in light of eternal life now seem inconsequential?
- ▶ What does the Scripture teach us about those huge events of anger and resentment in our lives? What does today’s liturgy teach us is the antidote for those events?

Gospel: Luke 3, 10-18

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ The role of John the Baptist was to prepare for the mission of Christ.
- ▶ The evangelist’s concern was not to paint a portrait of the Baptist.
- ▶ Luke’s intention was to present John as one who was open and receptive to God’s Word—who was willing to act on that Word and who was willing to share it with others.
- ▶ John is the prophet par excellence. He set out to preach God’s Word exhorting believers to turn away from sin and toward God. He called for nothing less than complete conversion of mind and heart.
- ▶ John evangelized the people. He called them to faith in God.
- ▶ John presented his catechism. He set forth what should be expected of a converted, repentant believer. The believer’s life should reflect the transformation and the repentance he or she professes.
- ▶ For example, a converted, repentant tax collector would be expected to treat the people with fairness. He would be expected to exact a modest, fair commission for his services. Sadly that was not the people’s experience of tax collectors.
- ▶ Tax collectors were Jews who contracted with the government to collect taxes. The government established the amount of the tax. The tax collector was then to charge a commission above and beyond that amount. That commission was his

fee. The common practice was for the tax collector to charge exorbitant fees on top of the tax owed, thus placing a huge burden on the tax payer. Adding insult to injury they seldom showed mercy and were extremely abusive.

- ▶ Soldiers were charged with guarding the tax collector. When they witnessed the greed of the tax collector they opportunistically wanted in on the action. They too exacted fees and bribes and used violent means to collect them.
- ▶ Not only was John challenging a new norm of behavior for the tax collector he was similarly challenging the soldiers to simply do what they were being paid to do—guard the tax collector.
- ▶ Luke understood conversion to mean that sinners would make every effort to right the wrongs they committed. All people—tax collectors, soldiers and the general public—were to live transformed lives and treat one another, especially the poor and marginalized members among them, with fairness, honesty and love.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What was Luke's understanding of how a converted person should behave?
- ▶ Luke illustrates God's care for his people. Who are the primary beneficiaries of John the Baptist's challenges in today's Gospel? What does it reveal to us about how we are to respond to conversion in our lives?
- ▶ Who in our world are victims of a similar kind of oppression that the tax payer in today's Gospel experienced? What are the implications? What should be our response?
- ▶ Luke is once again showing his audience what the kingdom Jesus came to establish was to resemble. Describe that kingdom. What would have to change in our world for such a kingdom to exist?
- ▶ What is the Good News in this Gospel? In what way is John the Baptist reaching out to us today from beyond the grave to teach us? What are some examples of ways in which the Christian community has listened to the challenge and have responded? What are some areas where change is needed? What can you do to effect that change?
- ▶ What does John the Baptist have to teach us about the coming of Christ in our lives today? In what way does this particular story today a preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas?
- ▶ What steps might you take this Advent season to become more aware and participate in the life of Christ who lives within, the Christ who is to come anew at Christmas and the Christ who is to come at the end of the world?

- ▶ What are the implications of this Gospel? What is the challenge?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question. (@ three minutes)

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.
I trust in you: strengthen my trust.
I love you: let me love you more and more.
I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.
I worship you as my first beginning.
I long for you as my last end.
I praise you as my constant helper.
And I call you as my loving protector.
I want to do what you ask of me:
In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.
Let me love you Lord as my God.
And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.
A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

1. If someone were to ask me if I worship false gods I would tell them that I absolutely do not! Yet, if we were to seriously consider our lives—if I were to seriously consider my life—the gods I worship are hardly made from wood or carved out of gold, but they are no less seductive. The gods I worship are the material blessings of this world. I am bombarded with material goods day after day. They call my name. I feel deprived if I am not able to have them.

Detachment from the things of this world is my ever present goal, but accomplishing that detachment is not so easy. I can be as seduced as the next person into thinking I should have all the luxuries that are dangled before us day after day. I do have many of them. I can fixate on an item and obsessively do not stop until I get it. After one day of enjoying the object of my obsession I am on to the next object. Such is the nature of excess.

When I do such things I do not have my attention focused on God where it should be. Advent is a time for us to detach—to simplify our lives—to seriously reflect and discern about where to find the subliminal idols that vie for our/my attention.

2. I have often wondered about the hugeness of mental illness. I have a child that is afflicted. The disease robs the person of any semblance of life. Life as we know it is simply not possible for him. The loss of who this child was and what he at one time was destined to become has at times been a huge burden.

His disease followed a spiritual path in his life. His spiritual insights are both gift and curse—taken to the extreme they are the basis of his psychosis—in their normalcy they are pure wisdom. The only consolation I have as his mother is the knowledge that this amazing young man will go straight to God when he dies. He has already been purged and purified on this earth.

One day I told him I would give my life if only he could have been spared from the suffering of this disease. His response to me was that I am not to worry about him. He is in God's hands and God's care. He has already been given the greatest gift anyone could be given—the gift of life—no matter how difficult that life is—it is pure gift.

The rare moments that he is able to acknowledge that he is sick (one third of schizophrenia victims never have an insight into their illness and cannot accept that they are ill) he understands his illness to be a fleeting, transitory step to his final destiny—total, eternal union with God. While much of his thinking is psychotic and delusional, glimpses of the most profound wisdom often peer through the fog of his greatly occupied mind. While his life's purpose is difficult to discern in this earthly realm, his ultimate destiny is not. One day this precious

young man will sit at the feet of God and gratefully breathe in the union he now can only enjoy in troubled mind that has as many voices of darkness as it does divine Light. I must believe that the hugeness of this disease is nothing in comparison to the eternal joy my child will enjoy as he anticipates his final reward.

3. Illegal immigrants in some ways are victims of the type of oppression exacted by the tax collector in today's Gospel. Critics of that statement would say that illegal immigrants are breaking the law and that is all that matters. I can only put myself in the place of a mother trying to provide a decent living for my children. If I lived in a place where I could not find food to feed my babies I would move heaven and earth—legal or not—to go where I could feed my children.

We often fail to put a human face on the oppression experienced by so many of God's children. One afternoon a Hispanic man was sitting in church; he was sobbing. He just lost a job he had had for over six years. He was fired because his boss could no longer risk having an undocumented worker.

The man came to this country because there was absolutely no work for him in his own country. His family had no one to provide for them. He sent all he made back to his parents. He shared with me how he was terrified of being deported. If they sent him back to his home he would surely starve to death, not to mention he would have no home to return to because his parents had since passed away.

The man was not looking for money; nor was he asking for food. The only request he had was for a Spanish language Bible. He was looking for consolation from a God who seemed terribly absent in his moment of utter aloneness.

Our response to people like him in many ways is akin to the response of the tax collector. We paint all immigrants with the same unlawful brush. We say because they break the law they are villains when all they are asking for is an honest day's work for an honest wage—very often in the jobs that most of us do not want.

John the Baptist invites a new way of living and acting in the world. I wonder how John would respond to the way we treat the alien from a foreign land in our midst. I wonder how John would respond to the recent legislation in Arizona that allows law enforcement to stop illegal immigrants for reasonable suspicion. The Bible is clear regarding how we are to treat the alien—we are to offer God's own hospitality.

Perhaps Advent is a time that we need to be more diligent in establishing Biblical justice in our world. The place to begin is to change our hearts when it comes to welcoming the stranger in our midst. I know this is a very complicated issue and it is easy to oversimplify it. If ever there was a time to ask the all important question WWJD (what would Jesus do)—it is now.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Catholic Social Teaching

Sin

Morality

Incarnation

Mary Model Disciple

Faith

Kingdom of God

Salvation

Revelation I or II

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Today's Gospel suggests a way of living and being in the world. True repentance requires that we treat one another with love and fairness. The victims of the tax collector's greed placed the greatest burdens on the back of the poor. Today would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING in today's extended session.

SIN

Today John the Baptist calls repentance. If we are to repent we must have a developed understand of the nature of sin in the first place. Thus, today our doctrinal session will focus on what the Church teaches about SIN.

MORALITY

John the Baptist suggests what it means to live the moral life. He upholds a standard of fairness and decency. Today's Gospel is an invitation to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about MORALITY. Thus today's extended session will address MORALITY.

INCARNATION

The reason for the season of Advent is preparation for the INCARNATION of God's Son. As Christmas fast approaches we will focus our attention in today's extended session on what we believe about the INCARNATION of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

MARY MODEL DISCIPLE

Mary is a major character in the season of Advent. She is an example of the “yes” we should all say to God when it comes to living the Christian life. John the Baptist invites conversion of heart and repentance. Mary is our finest example of what it means to have a converted heart. Today we will focus our attention on MARY in our extended session.

FAITH

Advent and today’s liturgy issues a resounding clarion call to embrace the faith we have been given and to pray for the grace and the strength to grow and develop that faith. Thus, today our doctrinal focus will be FAITH and what the Church teaches about FAITH.

KINGDOM OF GOD

The season of Advent is a time we recall Christ’s mandate to build the reign of God in our midst as we prepare for the coming of the Christ. Thus, today we will focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the KINGDOM OF GOD.

SALVATION

The Advent/Christmas season brings salvation history front and center in our lives. We remember the prophets and all that was proclaimed about the Christ. We hear of God’s cosmic sovereignty and we celebrate the salvation that is ours through the Incarnation of God’s Son. Today we will focus on the doctrinal teaching regarding SALVATION.

REVELATION Part I or II

What better time is there than Advent to focus our attention on God’s revelation to humanity? Today’s session will focus on God’s revelation.